

Community Legal Aid

A non-profit law firm serving the legal needs of low-income individuals and families in central northeast Ohio

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Diversity, Equity, Inclusion

Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility

by Dawn Spriggs, managing attorney, and Jodi Roberts, communications manager

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging conversations have exploded in the past few years, thanks to movements like Black Lives Matters, #MeToo, and LGBTQ+ rights. This is a good thing and should be celebrated!

But while this narrative at times feels limited to race, gender, and/or sexual orientation, we can't have authentic conversations about DEI and issues of belonging without also talking about accessibility for those who are differently abled.

When the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, it prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. It wasn't until 1990 that this same protection for participating in mainstream American life was extended to people with disabilities through the Americans with Disabilities Act.

History shows us that the way we view and value people in our society shows up in how they are treated. The discrimination people with disabilities have faced is no exception. It shows up in overt ways (like forced sterilization of people with mental or physical disabilities, spurred by the eugenics movement, in the mid- to late-1900s) and in structural ways (like grandfathering into the ADA that only buildings built after a certain year needed to be accessible in order to meet compliance). It shows up in our culture and language, which has improved in the past few decades as words like "crippled" or the "R" word have come to be rightfully seen as pejorative and demeaning. But even the word "disability" has a negative connotation and stigma attached to it to this day.

And, as we also see play out throughout history, those lower on the socioeconomic ladder tend to be treated the worst.

For those of us who have practiced public interest law, issues of discrimination for mental and physical ability happen all the time -- ADA-compliant buildings built before the law went into effect that still didn't have elevators; landlords refusing to allow "pets," even though the animal was a service or emotional support animal; free-for-all parking rules that didn't allow for designated

spots for individuals with health problems like COPD.

We've also seen this play out in education, where, until recent years, it was common practice to remove students with disabilities from their classrooms and place them in a special education classroom, effectively labeling them as a second-class student and denying them the normalcy of interacting with their peers.

Sometimes, these laws or decisions are made with good intentions. *I can't give this person a designated parking spot because I want to treat everyone the same. Or, If we put these kids in a special classroom together, we can better meet their learning needs and disrupt the other students less.* But what these sentiments offer is something less than access, something less than equitable, something less than meeting our fellow human beings where they're at.

As Abigail Abrams told Time Magazine in 2020, "Equality in theory does not mean equality in practice."

As organizations, and as individuals, we have a responsibility to bridge that gap. People need to be able to come to us in whatever way they can -- calling, online, walking into one of our offices. And when they get here, they need to find an open and welcoming space where they can communicate with and understand us.

When someone who is deaf or hard of hearing enters a space, what signage do we have available to help guide them appropriately? When someone who is blind enters that same space, how are they greeted? When we, as attorneys, send letters and written packets or materials to clients, are we using language they can understand without having gone through law school? Are we providing information in their native language? Are we considering the possibility that they may not be able to read at all?

While the U.S. has been called the great melting pot of the world, we've historically assigned greater importance and worth to individuals who fit a particular narrative of the "norm." Those who do not fit that narrative have found themselves excluded, restricted, and oppressed.

When we talk about people with disabilities, we tend to (whether consciously or subconsciously) undervalue them and their contributions to society. This stems from the language we use to how we include (or don't include) differently abled people in everyday work and activities.

This month, in recognition of National Disabilities Awareness Month, we challenge that status quo. People who are differently abled are not a problem to be fixed. They're people to be loved and valued and included.

This article is part of Legal Aid's "Big Ideas" series.

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